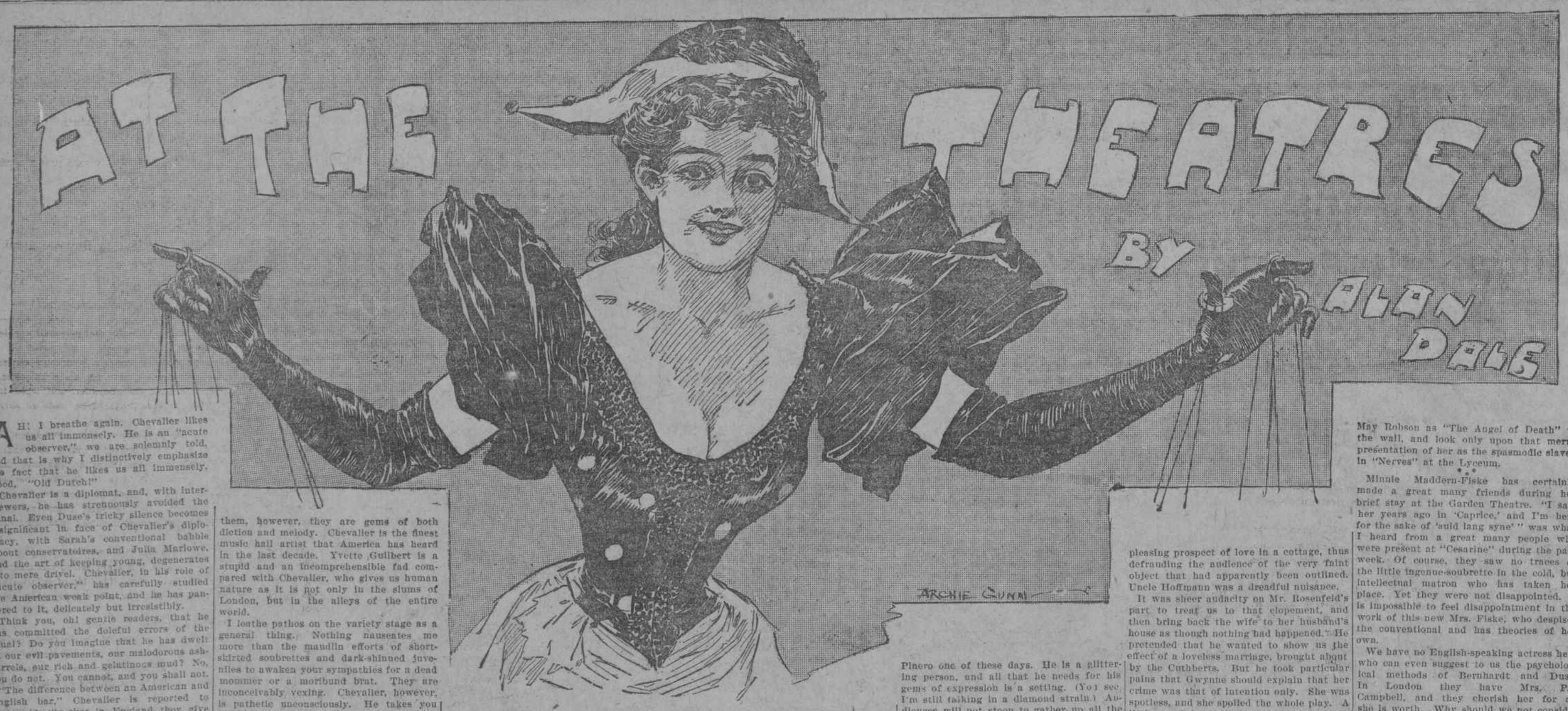
AT THE THEATRES



AH! I breathe again. Chevalier likes us all immensely. He is an "acute observer," we are solemnly told, and that is why I distinctively emphasize the fact that he likes us all immensely. Good. "Old Dutch!"

Chevalier is a diplomat, and, with interviewers, he has strenuously avoided the banal. Even Duse's tricky silence becomes insignificant in face of Chevalier's diplomacy, with Sarah's conventional babble about conservatoires, and Julia Marlowe, and the art of keeping young, degenerates into mere drivel. Chevalier, in his role of "acute observer," has carefully studied the American weak point, and he has pandered to it, delicately but irresistibly.

Think you, oh! gentle readers, that he has committed the doleful errors of the usual? Do you imagine that he has dwelt on our evil pavements, our malodorous ash-barrels, our rich and gelatinous mud? No, you do not. You cannot, and you shall not.

"The difference between an American and English bar," Chevalier is reported to have said, "is that in England they give you your whiskey and kindly allow you to mix it with all the water you want, while in happy, free America they give you your water and kindly allow you to mix it with all the whiskey you want."

I call it lovely. It is a stroke of genius. Max O'Rell never said anything five-eighths as bright, while Paul Bourget—well, Paul Bourget never said anything bright at all. Chevalier in less than a week has discovered the ineffably subtle charm of the whiskey allusion. Yet he has never seen an American farce-comedy. He has never assisted at a seance of American wit. He has never listened to the tinkling poker and whiskey jests uttered behind the footlights. He is an inspired genius, and that is the long and short of it. He has made his appeal short, but direct, and he has got there. His whiskey discovery has knocked all the hackneyed "I love dear America," and "I dote on the dear Americans" sayings into cocked hats.

Vive Chevalier! He is ours for keeps, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he made himself as incandescently popular in America as he has done in England.

I should like to hear his impressions of American audiences. They must be singularly droll. What are his ideas about a seething assemblage of people who applaud him lungily and handily before they have ever heard him? What has he to say on the subject of a pre-cooked reputation?

Men and women in this country are obliged to starve for years and years before they can ever hope for volleys of applause such as greeted Chevalier at Koster and Bial's last Monday night, before he had opened his mouth. Even then they don't always manage to secure it. English stars with reputations should arise and bless America. In no other city in the world can audiences be found alike unto those of this metropolis. Personally, I cannot help deploring the sycophantic adoration that renders such manifestations possible? New Yorkers, however, are kindly. They will applaud a star furiously before he has appeared, even if they stay away from his performances when they have listened to him. They clap him on the back on the strength of his European reputation, even if they exclaim afterward: "You can't duplicate it in America." It is a harmless proceeding when you come to analyze it, and one which in the years to come, when New Yorkers have left their swaddling clothes, will be impossible.

In the case of Chevalier, however, the before was justified by the afterward. He is an artist of the purest and most limpid water, and his character sketches would convince an audience of savages. Such songs as he utters might be vulgar and slummy, and even smelly. As he sings them, however, they are gems of both diction and melody. Chevalier is the finest music hall artist that America has heard in the last decade. Yvette Guilbert is a stupid and an incomprehensible fad compared with Chevalier, who gives us human nature as it is not only in the slums of London, but in the alleys of the entire world.

I loathe pathos on the variety stage as a general thing. Nothing nauseates me more than the maudlin efforts of short-skirted soubrettes and dark-shinned juveniles to awaken your sympathies for a dead mommer or a moribund brat. They are inconceivably vexing. Chevalier, however, is pathetic unconsciously. He takes you by easy stages from humor to pathos (and the cut is really a short one to an artist), and before you have finished laughing at him he has touched some of the chords that you keep hidden underneath your suspenders.

Chevalier richly deserves to succeed in America, and I feel convinced that he will do it. There are few keener artists even on the legitimate stage.

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Somehow or other I couldn't help wishing, when I saw Rose Coghlan in Brother Charles's diamond play, called "Madame," at Palmer's Theatre, that the playwright had chosen some other gems for his necklace. There are such things as rubies, emeralds, amethysts, opals and pearls. These precious stones are earnest and sincere. They have not degenerated into laughing stocks. Actresses don't lose 'em, as a rule. The comic papers rarely daily with them, and they are seldom worn at Baxter street weddings.

You feel inclined to giggle at diamonds nowadays. They are farcical and they are melodramatic, but they are not dramatic. You can't sympathize with them. You have had it dinned into your ears that their principal mission in this world is to get vulgarly lost, and when a playwright attempts to deal with such a loss seriously—well, you feel a little bit put out at his pathos.

In "Madame" Charles Coghlan has written a play that narrowly escaped the lustre of an overwhelming success. It escaped narrowly, but—it escaped. Mr. Coghlan wrote it for the cook and the housemaid, who, in England, own a literature peculiarly their own. There are novelists devoted exclusively to the servants' hall, and there are playwrights to dramatize their books. Charles Coghlan is one of them.

He introduces us to a pawnbroker-ine, who is a perfect lydy. In her noble cook's heart she is extremely ashamed of being connected with the establishment of Emanuel Brothers. She can drive a bargain with the best of 'em, but she has a soul above it. Moreover, she deals with real titled people, and isn't a bit surprised when Miss Priscilla Bellamy's carriage breaks down, and Miss Priscilla herself pays her a visit en route to an afternoon crush chez Queen Victoria of Buckingham Palace.

Mr. Coghlan shows that he is quite at home on the subject of royalty, and he makes the pawnbroker-ine say epigrammatic things about the Drawing Rooms. "I hear that they are very mixed," she says in a haughty, Lady Clara Vere de Vere sort of way, destined to bring a warm and cozy joy into the hearts of Mary Ann and Sarah Jane. They love this levity on the queenly topic. It sounds so free and easy, so convincing and so devilishly in the swim, don't you know. If you can't have the real thing, you know, a not too spurious imitation is always highly delectable.

Swipesey, as you are well aware, unable to get at Delmonico's ice cream, patronizes the one-cent lick of the hokey-pokey merchant, and is perfectly satisfied. It is the best he can afford, although he knows that better exists, and so it is with cook-y plays of the "Madame" type. The inhabitants of the servants' hall are fully cognizant of the fact that they can never get within hailing distance of Buckingham Palace. So they gratefully accept the ideas of gentlemen like Charles Coghlan, who—also unable to get within hailing distance—give them the result of fervid imagination.

The substitution by the Hon. Arthur Fitzmorris of paste diamonds for the real glowing gems in the necklace owned by Sir Vincent Bellamy, an exceedingly influential baronet, has been carefully adapted by Mr. Coghlan from some recent police court episodes in London. It would not have done for him to have portrayed Mme. Morensky as dealing with plain misters. There would have been no glow about the thing. The playwright has disarmed criticism, he thinks, by halo-ing his detective story with the glamour of the Court of St. James. And after all, that is all "Madame" turns out to be—a detective story. You can almost see the little messenger boys in the elevated trains, reading it surreptitiously while they chew the coy and elusive peanut.

You can see, in your mind's eye, lovely illustrations of the beautiful Priscilla Bellamy, with a very small waist, and exceedingly long legs, and similar pictures of the Hon. Arthur, spick-and-span in kid gloves, and a "top hat," and a beautiful dark, but wickedly insinuating mustache.

Mr. Coghlan, however, has written some witty dialogue, and purged of much of its irrelevant talk, "Madame" may become interesting. At any rate, it isn't a problem play, and at any rate, Mme. Morensky has had a married past. She has "kept house" for no fellow. She has merely jilted, and became another's. That is perfectly harmless, and the Young Person can go to Palmer's completely at her ease. For a lady addicted to the pawnbroker's sign, she has a loving heart, and her mature passion for Gerald Hazel, who looked so much like the dear departed jilted one that his advent gave her a shock, will be accepted by all.

Mr. Coghlan has done a great deal for Mme. Morensky. He has even made her self-sacrificing. Believing that Gerald has been captivated by the naughty Priscilla, she cries out—in other words—"I love you, but I can never be yours," and that sort of things always tells. It's no use laughing at it; it goes—with a vehement go, all the time. As a rule you get it from immature girls, but in "Madame" it is a fond heart that has beaten for at least forty Summers that makes the darling remark.

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Miss Coghlan's return to stellar glories is a most welcome event, and in "Madame" Mr. Coghlan has done for her all that a well-appointed brother could be reasonably expected to do. He has written her a nice fat part, admirably adapted to her autumnal powers. I confess that I have never liked Miss Coghlan better than I did in this play. She is a disciple of a school that will never grow old. She gives you illusion without unnecessary realism. She doesn't supply you with real tears, and she doesn't blow her nose on the stage.

Miss Coghlan's enemies will tell you that such a woman as Mme. Morensky undoubtedly blew her nose occasionally, and, moreover, had an exceedingly salient nose to blow. Miss Coghlan scorns such effects. She is of the stage, but not necessarily stagey, and she knows her dramatic alphabet from A to Z. The only fault I have to find with her lies in that abominable stage strut in which she indulges. She is a persistent strutter, and as she wears silk petticoats that frou-frou, you notice it all the time. It is a trifle, of course, but it is irritating. The peculiar Yum-Yum gown she wears in the first act struck me as being rather absurd. Still it is better than the impossible costumes Miss Coghlan generally affects, and, moreover, there was no line on the programme to say who made it, which is something to feel thankful for.

Harrington Reynolds was imported for the occasion. I don't know why—but he was. He is a stodgy gentleman, who wears a very large waistcoat, and he made Miss Coghlan look like a sylph. Perhaps that is why he was imported. On second consideration, it must have been. Leading men New York are rarely fat, and Miss Coghlan would not show off well by the side of a skeleton. Mr. Reynolds is not a bad actor, but it seems cruel to have put him to the inconvenience of an ocean-crossing for such a part.

The court dress worn by Miss Amy Busby made far more of a hit than did Miss Busby herself. It was a lovely white satin frock, very much like those worn in "Aristocracy," and a few extra yards of satin are always a good investment for a "society" play. I was amused to see underneath the cast an advertisement of "jewellers and importers of precious stones." It was singularly apropos.

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Sydney Rosenfeld may develop into a Pinero one of these days. He is a glittering person, and all that he needs for his gems of expression is a setting. (You see, I'm still talking in a diamond strain.) Audiences will not stoop to gather up all the loose beauties that Sydney throws at them. They prefer their humor shaped, bound up, and in concise form.

Say what you will, but a plot, although not always necessary, is a very handy thing for a young playwright to have about his house. Only a genius can give you a play that will satisfy you purely as an instance of development of character. You will tolerate that sort of thing, perhaps, from a man when his reputation is made. Until that has been achieved, give us a plot, if you please, oh, young and budding dramatists.

Mr. Rosenfeld's "House of Cards" at the Fifth Avenue Theatre, is comparatively plotless. The "cards" are nothing but visiting cards, meaningless P. P. C.'s, frivolous P. D. A.'s, cards with "Thursdays at home," and all that sort of thing written upon them. Mrs. Lloyd Cuthbert, of Newport and New York, is a senseless, inane sort of person; so is her daughter, Gwynne, who was nearly naughty; so is Eleanor, with an unstained character, and so are all the men. These types are endurable only as a contrast to something more serious. They are good enough for a light background; they are pleasing hors-d'oeuvres to a well regulated meal. But when you get nothing else, nothing but frippery to the right of you, and frippery to the left of you, you grow a trifle tired.

Even as an entertainment—one hears so much of "entertainments" nowadays—"A House of Cards" is but barely acceptable. In fact, the play is hopeful as a promise of better things to come. After having seen it, nobody can any longer affect to jeer and gibe at Sydney Rosenfeld. He has proclaimed himself. He has entered the field, and—if you will excuse me for saying it—Mr. Rosenfeld's chances are a good deal brighter than those of Henry Guy Carleton, Clyde Fitch or Augustus Thomas. And he understands what he is about. For a play with absolutely nothing in it, "A House of Cards" is extremely well constructed. It must be fearfully hard work to devise a four-act comedy about nothing at all. That is precisely what Mr. Rosenfeld has done. He must have started his work with a grim determination to grind out so many pages of manuscript. He could have begun at the end of "A House of Cards" almost as easily as at the beginning.

Then I was disappointed at the disastrous turn he gave to the character of Ned Garland. He had led you to believe that Eleanor would marry him, in his delightfully penniless state, and utter defiant "Boohs!" to the money-grabbing Cuthberts. It was very otherwise. Uncle Hoffmann cropped up, and interfered with the pleasing prospect of love in a cottage, thus defrauding the audience of the very faint object that had apparently been outlined. Uncle Hoffmann was a dreadful nuisance.

It was sheer audacity on Mr. Rosenfeld's part to treat us to that elopement, and then bring back the wife to her husband's house as though nothing had happened. He pretended that he wanted to show us the effect of a loveless marriage, brought about by the Cuthberts. But he took particular pains that Gwynne should explain that her crime was that of intention only. She was spotless, and she spoiled the whole play. A little naughtiness is quite pardonable, when it is to point a moral. Mr. Rosenfeld was afraid, just as Mr. Daniel Frohman feared to give us "The Case of Rebellious Susan" without a Susan pure as the undriven milk.

In fact, in "The House of Cards" all Mr. Rosenfeld's types were on the verge of something. They hesitated, and they were lost in the slough of colorlessness.

The tints of Miss Maxine Elliott, glowing and ardent as they are, might effectively be used in some more committal picture. This young woman is an example of the reversed proverb, "Handsome does as handsome is." She is a wonderously beautiful woman, who can act. Perhaps one of these days Miss Elliott will tell us how she accomplished so much in such a short time. It seems but yesterday that she was an impertinent, notoriety-seeking damsel, with half a dozen press agents drawing a big salary from her $40 per week. Now she can snap her fingers at such meretricious methods. She is the most interesting member of the cast of "A House of Cards," which includes such well-known people as Henrietta Crosman—who, alas! begins to waddle—Kate Oesterle, Frank Worthing, Frazer Coulter, Grant Stewart and Edgar Davenport.

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May Robson, the character actress, who is now playing the part of the lodging-house keeper in "Bohemia," at the Empire Theatre, has been photographed as "The Angel of Death." Yes, it's quite true. Miss Robson has made us laugh for so many years that managers simply smile at the idea of permitting her to make us cry. So in frenzied desperation Miss Robson hied herself to a photographer and sat for "The Angel of Death." I have one of the pictures on my desk as I write, and I assure you that it is very terrible. It is not, as you might imagine, an angel of death—from laughter, but a real tragic angel. She has stern, uncanny eyes, long, dishevelled locks and a voluminous white nightie over her head. Nobody would suspect, to look at this picture, that Miss Robson owned an ounce of humor. It is grim, and strong and morbid.

Isn't it funny how dissatisfied actresses can grow with themselves? Think of Miss Robson, with her God-given genius for humor, hankering for angels of death! But 'tis ever thus. My own opinion is that if some manager came forward and asked Miss Robson to star as Juliet, she would instantly throw aside her make-ups, and her character studies, and rush at the opportunity to enter into competition with Julia Marlowe and Mrs. Potter. I don't understand it. It is a problem that I am unable to solve. I shall turn my picture of May Robson as "The Angel of Death" to the wall, and look only upon that merry presentation of her as the spasmodic slavey in "Nerves" at the Lyceum.

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Minnie Maddern-Fiske has certainly made a great many friends during her brief stay at the Garden Theatre. "I saw her years ago in 'Caprice,' and I'm here for the sake of 'auld lang syne'" was what I heard from a great many people who were present at "Cesarine" during the past week. Of course, they saw no traces of the little ingenue-soubrette in the cold, but intellectual matron who has taken her place. Yet they were not disappointed. It is impossible to feel disappointment in the work of this new Mrs. Fiske, who despises the conventional and has theories of her own.

We have no English-speaking actress here who can even suggest to us the psychological methods of Bernhardt and Duse. In London they have Mrs. Pat Campbell, and they cherish her for all she is worth. Why should we not consider Mrs. Fiske as our own Mrs. Pat Campbell? It is absurd to liken her to Sarah or to Duse. She lacks the temperament of either of these actresses. She has one of her own, and the more you see of her the better you will like her. She is an acquired taste, like olives and caviare.

The plebs will never go wild over Minnie Maddern-Fiske. She is not what they call on the Rialto "strong." She is not a ranter. She doesn't know the meaning of the word "stagey." In "Cesarine" there were moments when I said to myself: "Mrs. Fiske went do. This promenade through an exacting role is impertinent." But ten minutes afterward she had riveted my interest, and I found myself slavishly admiring.

The personality of this queer little creature is odd. She is slight and girlish and at the same time matronly and incipiently double-chinned. Sometimes she appeals to you as a little chit of an actress who is audacious enough to tackle roles that might frighten Duse; then you see her sitting there, chubby and age-ing, and you wonder why you never noticed it before.

It is such unusualities as these that impress themselves upon a novelty-seeking public like that of New York. Mrs. Fiske is absolutely unconventional. I quite understand now why she wished to sink the Minnie Maddern part of her life and begin a new career under a new name. She has developed, matured, and learned a new phase of her art. In "Cesarine" she shows us that plainly. And I hope that during the season to come we shall have plenty of Minnie Maddern-Fiske in some brand-new palpitant plays not old fossilized ragouts such as "Marie Deloche" and "La Femme de Claude."

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The season is dying and the stock of "attractions" is growing beautifully less. There are still enough to go round, thanks for kind inquiries, but in a few weeks we shall be climbing up the golden stairs to the roof gardens. Managers with opera houses will soon begin advertising their usual clamorous supply of iced air, and we shall be listening to those lovely glacial stories of zero temperature and atmosphere twenty degrees cooler than in the street.

The indications are that few theatres will brave the Summer. It will be a case of roof gardens or nothing at all. Time was when a belief lurked in many a fond managerial mind that the average New Yorker ran to comic opera in the dog days. That belief was rudely dispelled, and the roof gardens have solved the problem of Summer entertainment. Wait until you see the monster garden that is to rear itself above Hammerstein's Olympia, before you decide that life in New York during July and August isn't worth living.

ALAN DALE.